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Warnings We Do Not Heed

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The Here and Now

Wine grapes have a richly pleasant smell ripening on the vine – almost sensual. But leave them to rot and they'll sting the nose with their pungent, decaying aroma. Lazario "Leo" Sorrento remembered this the minute he set foot on the old family vineyard after being gone nearly sixty years. The smell of grapes, strongly vinegar-like, once deeply purple, now putrid and molding.

He'd expected to walk the vineyard again, smell the sweetness of the air and bask in early memories like the sun shining down on his shoulders. But he couldn't. Not with such a suffocating odor choking everything. Not with the pathways cluttered with vines, ripped from their trellises, tangled in jumbled bunches, blocking row after row. The whole place fallow, left to the rats and vermin. Instead, Leo satisfied himself watching a line of ants crawl up and down a decayed piece of lattice wood, remembering a place he once thought of as his personal garden of eden.

"Grandpa?" Leo's granddaughter, Grace, asked, tugging the sleeve of his flannel.

The vineyard wasn't his legacy. He knew that. That blessing belonged to his children and grandchildren. And eventually, their children and their grandchildren. But still, seeing the grapevine ruined was hard on his pride. He'd grown up cultivating the land

with his father and brother, mother and sister, intending to create a *tenuta* of authentic Nebbiolo and Barolo wines – a veritable dynasty. But the war had come, and with it those horrible, invading Germans that Stalin let walk right in – all of whom his father insisted could be reasoned with so there was no need to flee like the rest of their village. But sadly, the Nazi's were evil men intent on evil – with his mother and sister the first to pay, suffering the worst crime imaginable. The kind Leo could never excise from his memory after hearing their anguished screams and heart-breaking cries that afternoon -- while his father pled with the Germans for decency and he and his brother hid in the attic like cowards.

Hours after his mother, father and sister had been killed, he and his brother finally climbed down and ran for their lives -- escaping to the border and freedom. But rather than feel liberated, both felt guilty. Like they should've stayed and joined their family in the ground. Still, they made it all the way to the Americas and immediately enlisted in the U.S. Army. Returning a year later in uniform to excise full vengeance and make those responsible pay. Too little, too late, as they say, and not at all satisfying to either man. So much so, when Italy was liberated and the war won, his brother killed himself rather than return home. Leaving behind only a brief note for his brother:

No amount of blood shed can ever erase the shame I feel letting my mother and father and sister suffer such untimely deaths.

Leo burned the note. He couldn't have it in the same world, existing on the same plane. He couldn't have anything from his previous life and still walk the world.

“Grandpa?” Grace spoke again, drawing out the *a* in a lovingly singsong way.

“*Grandpaah.*” Trying to get his attention. Patting the back of his hand and pulling at his cuff.

Leo looked up the stone steps leading to his childhood *abitazione*. “Twenty-seven,” he counted. Same as when he used to race his brother up and down, good naturedly trying to be the first and fastest. But now, as an old man, failed in strength to make even the first step. Instead, he satisfied himself listening to the birds sing, remembering how he once lived in paradise as a young boy.

“*Grandpaaaahh?* What are you looking at?” Tugging his sleeve. Pulling him. Trying to get his attention. “Why won’t you answer me? Do you want some eggnog? Mommy sent me in here to see if you wanted something to drink before everyone arrives.”

Leo was lost to the past – inventorying all the choices from that day to this current moment. Weighing the ups and downs, successes and regrets. Wondering if any decision he’d ever made, even just one, had been about anything other than fear. Fear and loneliness and shame. He didn’t think so.

He’d returned from the war to America, still a fairly young man, and took up residence in the Napa Valley of California’s beautiful climate. Hoping to start another vineyard. Marry and have children – live the good life, grow old, be happy. But his first wife died soon after they married – a complication neither could’ve predicted, and no one’s fault. But since people rarely considered the heartbreak of a young man who has become a widow too soon, and life still required bills to be paid and food to be bought and work to be done, Leo shoved it all down and moved on. He went to work, first as a field

hand in the burgeoning vineyards of Schramsberg, Beringer and Inglenook. Then as an enology growth manager for Stoney Hill and, later, Sutter Home.

“Grandpa? Would you like some eggnog?” Frustrated.

Plying his considerable skills for pennies on the dollar, Leo earned enough to marry again, buy a modest home, and raise children. Only he didn't want to engage so much in his marriage, or raise his children, or live this life. He didn't want friends necessarily. Or know his neighbors and co-workers. Sure, he loved them all tremendously. With all his heart. And was very loving and grateful for them. It was always a joy to hear the sounds of his wife cooking and cleaning and taking care of the children. The sounds of his children playing and laughing and growing up. His co-workers arguing and drinking and living. His friends talking over cards and smoking cigars and chatting the evenings away. He loved listening to them all and wanted to be around it. Just not part of it. Not really. More happy-adjacent than directly involved.

He certainly went through the motions -- shaking men's hands and kissing ladies' cheeks after church service each Sunday. Wishing friends and family “Happy Holidays” and “Merry Christmas.” Attending birthday parties and school plays, barbeques and sporting events. Walking the parade route in his Army dress uniform every year on VE-day, and having a pint in the local tavern with old war buddies after. Even writing letters, when the occasion called, to his congressman and local elect. Engaged and All-American as any man could be. But he wasn't. He wasn't. He was part of it, sure, but always there was an inner aloofness – an untouchable quality where the self was kept separate.

“Mommy?” Grace called out. “I asked Grandpa if he wanted eggnog like you said to ask, but he isn’t answering. He looks weird and just keeps staring at the wall. Should I keep asking?”

Leo took his final look around the old vineyard and decided it was all just a dream. An anecdote. A metaphor. A temporary reprieve.

Some would call this world limbo, I imagine. But really nothingness is its true nature, having existed across all time, border, space and language. The Norse called it “Ginnungagap” -- the gaping void. The Christians “Sheol” -- the holding place. The Buddhists and Hindus say Sunyata for hollowness. In Judaism its Ayin. But really all is the same: peace to some, creation for others, death to many. Even hell for those who can't find forgiveness.

Leo reached out his hand, trying to keep it from shaking. *Please forgive me.*

“Grandpa? Grandpaah?” Grace pulled on her grandfather’s sleeve. Her little eyes twinkling with confusion. Him just sitting in his plush chair – the one reserved for him that no one else was allowed to sit in.

“Grace!” her mother, Sandy, spoke sharply. Walking into the room, trying not to let the urgency and fear enter her voice. “Come away from Grandpa. He’s tired and needs to rest. We’ll bring him some eggnog later.”

“Why doesn’t Grandpa talk? Is he feeling blue? Like when my tummy aches and I don’t want to eat?”

"Maybe. I think Grandpa just needs a little quiet time. Why don't you go help Daddy and Nana in the kitchen with dinner. I think Nana might like some eggnog too. Would you do that for me, sweetheart?"

"Sure, Mommy." Grace smiled and skipped away. Her Mary Janes clicking on the wooden floor as she headed to the kitchen and her grandmother.

Sandy walked to her father. And despite how hard it was, with her pregnant, swollen belly making it difficult, she dropped to her knees in front of him and took his hand. Clutching it like a lifeline.

"Papa," she whispered. "Ohh, Papa."

Sandy didn't stay long. The doorbell rang alerting her to friends and family arriving for Christmas dinner. And as they began to fill the foyer, she quickly stood, wiped the tears from her eyes and left the formal living room to greet them. Leaving her father to his chair.

Sandy decided, after a brief internal debate, to leave her father where he was for the time being -- with the fire and the Christmas tree and the smell of burning wood from the fireplace permeating the house. No one would question why – not her brothers and sisters nor their spouses. Not even their mother. She'd tell everyone soon enough. Once everyone had settled in the kitchen and family room where they always gathered.

How fitting, Sandy thought. Her father sitting alone in a separate room, listening to the sounds of people and activity filling the house -- everyone else gathering in the kitchen, talking and laughing and enjoying each other's company.

Sandy had wondered why, once or twice, about this. Why her father preferred it this way. But in all her years, she never felt comfortable enough to ask. Neither, apparently, had anyone else.

The End.